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Giving Them Futz Before the Summit

WASHINGTON—President Reagan upped the ante Wednesday—just two weeks before his summit with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev—by suggesting it is time to “stop futzing around.”

— From front page of USA Today, Nov. 7, 1985

When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev read the quote, he called in his Kremlin advisers. “What does futzing mean?” he asked them.

“I don’t know,” his foreign minister said. “We’ve asked the White House to clarify it. Here is their reply: ‘Don’t play dumb. You do it all the time.’”

Gorbachev was furious. “The president knows we don’t know. Why would he send us a message we don’t understand? Can’t anyone in our embassy in Washington find out what it means?”

“Our ambassador advises us futzing has to do with putting our medium-range missiles along the Czech border.”

A Soviet marshal said, “He’s mistaken. It refers to the buildup of conventional forces in Poland. The Americans are saying they want us to pull them out or they will futz us.”

“You’re both wrong,” the KGB director said. “Futzing is another word for defecting. Reagan couldn’t believe it when our man, after defecting, turned around and redefected to us. We futzed the CIA and the president didn’t like it.”

Gorbachev said, “You all have theories but you don’t have facts. How can I face Reagan in Geneva when I have no idea what he is talking about?”

The general secretary’s scientific adviser said, “My people have studied the message and conclude it has to do with ‘Star Wars.’ Reagan was talking about the shield the U.S. plans to build to prevent our missiles from hitting them.”

Gorbachev declared, “What is my response if he tells me in Geneva to stop futzing around?”

“You tell him you’ll be glad to when he stops futzing around with Star Wars, and not a minute sooner.”

“He won’t go for it,” Gorbachev said. “Why don’t I offer to cut back on futzing by 50 percent, provided Reagan does the same?”

The Soviet marshal said, “They will cheat.”

“Then we’ll cheat too. We will match them futz for futz,” Gorbachev told them. “But I still have the feeling the president was talking about something else.”

The foreign minister said, “Did you do any futzing in your private life that Reagan may have been referring to?”

Gorbachev shouted, “They’re lies, all lies.”

The KGB director said, “I can attest to that.”

The press chief said, “Perhaps the president misspoke and didn’t mean to use the word futzing at all. He’s been known to say something and then take it back three hours later.”

Gorbachev was getting impatient. “We can’t speculate. We have to find out exactly what his message meant or cancel the summit.”

A secretary came into the room and handed a cable to the KGB director, whose eyes almost popped out of his head.

“Our language experts have tracked down the word. It’s Yiddish and means ‘fooling around, or not being serious.’”

“You’re crazy. What is Ronald Reagan doing speaking Yiddish?” the foreign minister said.

“It makes you wonder,” Gorbachev mused. “Find out what his name was before he changed it to Reagan.”

“Yes, sir,” the KGB director said.

“And,” Gorbachev continued, “also get me a Yiddish dictionary so I can answer him in kind.”

“We can’t, sir. They’ve all been burned.”

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